

TOURISM, ECONOMY AND IDENTITY

by Marien André*

'Identity reveals a new way that preferences can be changed'¹

For some years now economists and scholars of productive processes from various disciplines have been talking about a new concept: the economy of identity. The changes that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century towards a global world, which were increasingly unifying, at first appeared to be a threat to the social and cultural aspects of the planet's peoples and nations. However, globalisation itself has brought about a revaluation of these aspects. Thus, criteria such as the consumption of local products, goods and services, blessed with a uniqueness characteristic of a given society and region, are gaining ground, as they are perceived by the demand as bearers of a new concept of added value.

This change of paradigm in consumption is leading regions and the agents operating therein to promote production with a seal of origin, with its own designation, a clear, differentiated identity that gives them a competitive edge. One should bear in mind, however, that this process is neither direct nor simple. In the first place, there must be a genuine collective identity, and a deep-rooted sense of belonging, an awareness of this identity. An identity as the sum of a series of distinctive elements, highly charged with symbolism, with a traditional yet dynamic and changing base, with tangible elements, such as material cultural heritage or landscape, and also non-material heritage, such as traditions or ways of life. Indeed, it is the people acting in a region should start the process of recovering identity, ini-

tially as part of its wealth and heritage, but also as an economic driver. Furthermore, this identity should be perceived by the potential demand; the identity must be able to be defined and differentiated through a series of attributes that will make up what is known as the associated 'image'. Finally, these attributes, this 'image', must be explained and valued by the demand; it must be attractive to draw their attention. It therefore requires strategies from marketing and promotion, and also the creation of labels, such as those for the designation of origin, quality seals, or other types of certification in the most general sense.

Cuisine, agriculture, wine production, crafts and cultural production in any of its forms (material and non-ma-

1 AKERLOF, G. and R. E. KRANTON (2000): 'Economies and identity', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. CXV, No. 3, August 2000



terial) are some of the sectors directly linked to this growing trend. It is in this respect that we also witness a change of paradigm towards tourism. The differentiation, singularity and identity of destinations are, more than ever today, the keystone to the competitiveness of destinations. Indeed, tourism becomes an opportunity to address socio-cultural standardisation, as an element of visualisation, preservation and even reaffirmation of their identity. Tourism is a privileged tool for projecting (and protecting) the attributes of identity, bringing them closer to the consumer, while generating positive effects on a social and cultural level. However, it also brings economic advantages. Tourism becomes key to the construction of an economy of identity, as it enables the destination to become known in-

ternationally and its differentiation is an added value, and also thanks to the direct generation of economic activity, its extension to other branches of the economy through significant multiplying effects, and the vertebration of economic and social activity in regions that are in decline or undergoing transformation. In this way, tourism enables us to draw together endogenous and sustainable development and growth models, and becomes a luxury showcase for promoting the region and its society.

If we analyse the relationship between tourism and identity, the first thing we notice is that every sustainable tourism model incorporates three basic pillars: environmental protection; economic profitability; and, the

one that concerns us, social and cultural preservation and promotion. It is therefore a close, entirely unavoidable relationship. In this respect, it should also be said that although there are types of tourism in which this relationship is abundantly clear (such as cultural tourism, or what is properly called 'identity' tourism), limiting the scope to these specific cases would be reductionist. In the case of regions and societies with defined, singular identities, this identity really does pervade everything from lifestyle and forms of production to the natural landscape and the human landscape. Therefore, any tourism activity on offer and undertaken within this region must naturally and spontaneously include elements of itself, material or non-material, perceptible or not. This dynamic has for years configured highly consolidated destinations with an associated image clearly defined on the tourism map. An undoubtedly paradigmatic case in point is Scotland.

TOURISM IS A PRIVILEGED TOOL FOR PROJECTING THE ATTRIBUTES OF IDENTITY, BRINGING THEM CLOSER TO THE CONSUMER, WHILE GENERATING POSITIVE EFFECTS ON A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LEVEL

However, as previously mentioned, in the last decade many other destinations have realised how strongly identity has become a basic element of differentiation and competitiveness; hence the general change in strategy for attracting visitors. The chance to compete does not just come from offering attractive prices, as it used to, or even from having resources like sun and sand, snow, or in extreme cases, a given monumental or artistic heritage. The reduction of distances in cost and time, and the inclusion of new destinations, amongst other factors, have

helped bring about an increase in the range of options, so that the mere presence of the resource is no guarantee of success without differentiation. The level of attractiveness lies increasingly in being able to present oneself as different from the rest, and so offer visitors unique experiences.

Moreover, the advantages are not only for tourism per se, and for the competitiveness of the destination. We have already mentioned the multiplying effect on the rest of the economy, or the external effects towards the region. We still need to add other opportunities from tourism widely recognised by the academic literature and empirical evidence as an element, amongst others, of landscape and environment regeneration; the reassertion of social and cultural pride and self-esteem; or the recovery of the identifying elements of local material and non-material culture, whether in use or having fallen into disuse. As an example it is worth mentioning that the main factor of preservation, recovery and use of cultural heritage in Catalonia in the last fifteen years has been the growing consideration of cultural assets as a tourism resource.

In regard to the application of a destination and product differentiation strategy within the economy of identity, it should be said that this is based on three clearly separate pillars:

- Identification of those differential features that constitute the image to be presented.
- Tangibility and marketing through the creation of goods or services.
- Development of a marketing strategy adapted to the product.

This all leads to defining a tourism brand as a symbolic element aimed at

making a profitable image and a differentiated product that responds to the values and interests of one or several market segments, without sacrificing its own interest. This brand becomes the basis for marketing the destination and its products. In this respect, there are destinations, like Catalonia, that use the region-brand as an umbrella brand to present a tourism offer linked to the identity aspects.

If we analyse the evolution of the strategies used by destinations up to now, we must emphasise that although at present agreement on the fundamental role of identity is practically unanimous, experience has shown that incorporation of this approach has not been uniform either in time or space. Therefore, in some destinations, like the aforementioned Scotland, identity has always existed, whether consciously or unconsciously, within the tourism policy followed in the public and private sectors and amongst civil society. However, in other cases, like most Mediterranean destinations (including Catalonia), which have a climate and geography that favour the spontaneous development of products popular with the masses, such as sun and sand tourism, although it put them prominently on the world tourism map, it pushed the question of identity into the background.

In fact, as one can read in articles on tourism in Catalonia, it was not until recently that identity became a priority in Catalan tourism policy. Indeed, it was only with the drawing up and approval of the 2005-2010 Strategic



Tourism Plan for Catalonia that the promotion of the tourism-identity binomial was specified. The Plan includes specific areas in this regard, but the most important thing is that it states a new focus in which identity pervades the definition of the Catalan tourism model right across the board.

In conclusion, here and now in the twenty-first century one can state that tourism has reached a level of maturity in which the consumer's decision-making process is a far cry from what was heralded by the tourism boom as a large-scale phenomenon. Experience, uniqueness, authenticity are key in the planning and success of destinations. And all of them could be joined under the seal of 'identity'. Tourism and identity are therefore inevitably twinned by the building of new economic models, in tune with the criteria and principles that inspire the current moment and the near future.

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